DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 842 IR 056 157

AUTHOR McKinney, Barbara J.
TITLE The Contribution of Iona and Peter Opie to Children's Literature.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 5p.; In: Sustaining the Vision. Selected Papers from the Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship (24th, Worcester, England, July 17-21, 1995); see IR 056 149.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Authors; Books; *Childrens Literature; *Fairy Tales; Folk Culture; Intellectual Disciplines; Library Collections; *Literary History; Literature Reviews; *Nursery Rhymes; *Oral Tradition; Reference Materials; Research

ABSTRACT

Iona and Peter Opie's contribution to children's literature began with a volume on the origins of nursery rhymes. A nursery rhyme tells a brief and memorable surrealist story about people, animals, or familiar activities. Most nursery rhymes were not originally composed for children but were fragments of ballads or folk songs, remnants of ancient customs or rituals, simple songs from taverns, and jests or innuendoes. "The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes" contains an alphabetical listing of verses, with the earliest recorded print date, variants, pictorial examples, and notes and comments for each rhyme. Iona and Peter Opie's work included compiling school children's lore and playground rhymes in "The Lore and Language of School Children," and "The People in the Playground." In the process of producing numerous other publications, the Opies compiled a collection of 20,000 titles of children's literature. Following Peter Opie's death, the Bodleian Library in Oxford (England) purchased the Opie collection, which will be microfilmed and indexed by UMI (University Microfilms International). Iona and Peter Opie used their collection and scholarship to give the world a new way of looking at children's literature. (Contains 31 references.) (Author/SWC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 400 842

The Contribution of Iona and Peter Opie to Children's Literature

by
Barbara J. McKinney
Oak Grove High School
North Little Rock, AR USA

Iona and Peter Opie's work on *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* began on a walk beside a cornfield near their home in Waresley. One of the Opies placed a ladybird on a finger and the two recited the well-known nursery rhyme. Iona was expecting the couple's first child, and the couple were very interested in everything one could learn about children. The Opies wondered about the origin of the verse. That weekend they went to the Kensington Public Library in London to see what they could learn. There was not a satisfactory answer. After several stops, they ended up in the British Museum with a copy of J. O. Halliwell's *Nursery Rhymes of England* published in 1842. The Opies realized the market could use a new book on the origins of nursery rhymes. While they were doing their research for this book, Iona realized that the next time they began another work they would need to search through all of the volumes again. The Opies started making cards on anything they thought might be of interest to them in the future.

The publisher Herbert van Thal seemed interested in their idea for the book, but when he saw the manuscript, he said they needed a paragraph beneath each rhyme. The Opies did not see how they could accomplish this at the time, but as a result they learned to be scholarly in their research. When the manuscript was given to Elizabeth Withycombe after seven years of work and rewriting the introduction, Withycombe presented the manuscript to Oxford University Press. The editors could not find one mistake. The large first printing in 1951 was 10,000 copies.

The Opies found the earliest use of the term nursery rhyme can be traced back to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* for July 1824 in the essay "On Nursery Rhymes in General." Prior to this time the rhymes were referred to as "songs," "ditties," "Tommy Thumb's," or "Mother Goose's". To qualify a rhyme usually is brief, and it must be memorable. It should tell a surrealist story about people, animals, or familiar activities. Every country has its share of nursery rhymes and lullabies. Most nursery rhymes were not originally composed for children but were often fragments of ballads or folk songs, remnants of ancient customs or rituals, ditties from taverns, and jests or innuendoes. Probably the only rhymes composed for the nursery before 1800 are the rhyming alphabets, the infant amusements, and the lullabies. However, the verses were said or sung by mothers of every economic and social level or nurses to soothe or amuse a child without thought of origin.

The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes has an alphabetical arrangement of verses, cites the earliest recording in print of each rhyme, and gives variants. There are pictorial examples and thorough notes and comments. "Ladybird" carries the child's warning to the ladybird when the insect is set on a finger. A woodcutter of the reign of George II depicts the ladybird on a finger. Once the warning is recited the ladybird is blown on once. Normally this tiny beetle spreads its wings and flies away. The rhyme may be a relic of something of significance. There are similar incantations in France, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark and Sweden. It may even have its origins in the Egyptian beliefs associated with Isis. The earliest written record is in Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book published in 1744.

In *All Things Considered*, G. K. Chesterton said that in fairy tales the idea that runs throughout is that peace and happiness can only exist on some condition. This idea is the core of ethics. A noble person may be brought low by enchantment or human beastliness, but the low are rarely noble. The established order is not upset. The magic in the tales is people and creatures being shown for what they really are. Compared with the age of some of the tales the term "fairy tale" does not seem to have entered the English language until 1749 according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The term came from France from Madame d'Aulnoy's *Contes des fees* which was translated as *Tales of the Fairys*.

The characteristics of a fairy tale today are that it must be unbelievable and contain an enchantment or supernatural element that is imaginary. The hero is usually a young person. The

IR056157

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Ken Haycock
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

virtues kindliness, presence of mind, courage, and willingness to take advice are rewarded. Wealth, an ideal mate, and comfortable living are the rewards desired. What seem like romantic details may have been the social conditions of the time. The magic in the tales heightens the realism and gives the child a chance to wonder.

"Thumbelina" is a literary fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen published in 1836. Mary Howitt translated it into English and published it in *Wonderful Stories for Children* in 1846. Howitt did not approve of the wife consulting with a witch, so she revised the beginning.

The Classic Fairy Tales places in perspective the contributions of Perrault, the Grimm brothers, and Hans Christian Andersen. Each tale has an historical introduction showing its development. The text of the story is given in the first English edition or the earliest surviving text.

Playground jingles are invented by children and are not intended for adults. Part of the fun is that adults know nothing about them. Children's lore alters little from generation to generation. Traditional lore exists everywhere with more games known to city children because they are in closer contact with other children and have time to play. The same lore exists in different areas and backgrounds. A new rhyme can travel by oral transmission throughout the country rapidly. Playground lore is often passed from child to child within an hour of learning it. The lore is usually passed from one child to another of a similar age. If a rhyme can be traced for one hundred years, it has been retransmitted over and over again. It is surprising it continues so long, and it bears any resemblance to the original. Variations occur more often through misunderstanding than by design. Children tend to claim to have made up a new rhyme when they have only changed a word. The oral rhymes can be divided into those that regulate games and relationships and those that are lively expressions of feelings. Children find rhyme enjoyable and funny in itself.

The Opies decided to collect the children's lore from school children themselves. They sent a letter to the *Sunday Times* in 1951 which provided a vast number of new correspondents. It was the teachers who made the network with schools all over Great Britain. These teachers had their students fill out questionnaires. This followed with "interviews" with five thousand school children by mail. The publication in 1959 of *The Lore and Language of School Children* astonished the public with the private world of children. In 1991 Sandy Hobbs and David Cornwell stated *The Lore and Language of School Children* is the most widely cited modern book on folklore.

Iona Opie visited a local school playground during recess every week for fourteen years. Often two kinds of play were taking place. Private, creative play for one or a small group is not sufficiently structured to be handed down to future generations. The fun is in the inventing. While it may be played on the playground, it is best played at home. Traditional games were once played by adults with children watching and copying for their own play. Knucklebones was an amusement of women in classical Greece. Today the game would be called "Jacks". By the nineteenth century the population moved to the cities, and there was less room for games. University students were limited to playing with other boys from the same school. The Victorians had a passion and talent for organizing, so games established rules and some such as football gradually turned into spectator sports.

Since Iona Opie was neither parent nor teacher, the children accepted her as a person who listened to their jokes and games and wrote them down. Iona wrote down the events as they happened and the conversations as they were spoken. *The People in the Playground* gives a view of games coming and going, the differences in attitudes between boys and girls, and human behavior. Iona allowed children to be her teachers as she observed and listened to them.

As the Opies began their research Peter Opie purchased a copy of *The Cheerful Warbler*, a nursery rhyme book illustrated with woodcuts. James Kendrew, a York bookseller, published this book and sold it for one penny in 1820. The book itself is unimpressive but it indicated how deeply nursery rhymes had become a part of print and culture. As progress continued on *The Dictionary* the Opies purchased more books to use. Peter especially realized the importance of collecting and also the necessity of scholarship. Every book was read and annotated so it could be studied within its period. This establishment of interrelationships was possible because of the subject itself. The Opies worked together and separately. Iona analyzed the folklore material and wrote summaries of her observations. She gave Peter the material for the next section of the book they were working on. He gave her the written section. She returned the written section with

comments. Only after this was accomplished did the couple discuss the work verbally. Iona says they knew their books must be exceptional so they could live on the royalties. The only way they could accomplish this was to work long, regular hours. Most mornings began with a search through the catalogues at breakfast so orders could be placed. If they went to London or Oxford to do research, they visited shops to search for books. Every Saturday Peter searched the shops while Iona bought groceries. As the Opies' reputation developed they were given the opportunity to purchase some items privately. Occasionally a book would be given to them since the owner knew it would be cared for. The Opies' collection grew to 20,000 titles. When Peter died in 1982, Iona wanted to preserve the collection in a permanent place. Through contributions the Opie Collection was purchased by the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Iona donated one half the value. Now UMI is microfilming the collection with a cumulative index. Iona and Peter Opie used their collection and scholarship to give the world a new way of looking at children's literature.

Bibliography

Alderson, Brian. "The Pleasures of the Chase: The Opie Collection" *New York Times Literary Supplement*. (April 3, 1987).

Alderson, Brian W., editor and translator. *Three Centuries of Children's Books in Europe* Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1968.

Avery, Gillian, "Childhood's Companions" *Children's Literature* volume 12 New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, pp. 154-161.

Avery, Gillian and Julia Briggs, editors. *Children and Their Books: A Celebration of the Work of Iona and Peter Opie* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

"Children's Books Fall 1974 *New York Times Book Review* (November 3, 1974), p. 23.

Cott, J. "When the Voices of Children are Heard on the Green" *Pipers at the Gates of Dawn: The Wisdom of Children's Literature* New York: Random House, 1983.

Dalrymple, Helen. "British Folklorist Delivers Lecture to Overflow Crowd" *LC Information Bulletin* volume 50, number 13, pp. 258-259.

Egoff, Sheila *Thursday's Child: Trends and Patterns in Contemporary Children's Literature* Chicago: American Library Association, 1981.

Farrar, J. Howard. "How a Ladybug Launched a Book Collection" *The Christian Science Monitor* (June 15, 1987), p. 31.

"From Knucklebones to Pooh in Japanese" *The Bookseller* (September 22, 1989), pp. 988-989.

Hobbs, Sandy and David Cornwell. "The Lore and Language of School Children: A Study of Scholars' Reactions" *Folklore* volume 102, number 2, 1991, pp. 175-182.

"Iona Opie" *Something About the Author* Detroit: Gale Research, volume 63, pp. 112-126.

"Iona Opie, 1923- " *Something About the Author, Autobiography* Series volume 6, Detroit: Gale Research, 1988, pp. 203-217.

Johnson, Edna, Evelyn R. Sickels, and Frances Clark Sayers. "Around the World in Nursery Rhymes" *Anthology of Children's Literature* 4th revised ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970, pp. 3-5.

Marcus, Leonard S. "In Search of 'Childish Things': An Interview with Iona Opie" *The Lion and the Unicorn*, volume 13, number 2, 1990, pp. 7-27.

Morgan, Edwin. "The Dark Side of Fairyland" *New York Times Literary Supplement* (December 6, 1974), p. 1371.

Muir, Percy. *English Children's Books 1600 to 1900* London: T. T. Batsford Limited, 1954.

The Opie Collection of children Literature (brochure) Detroit: University Microfilm International.

Opie, Iona. "May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture: The Nature and Function of children's Lore" *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries* volume 4, number 4, Summer 1991, pp. 350-360.

Opie, Iona. *The People in the Playground* New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Opie, Iona. *Tail Feathers from Mother Goose: The Opie Rhyme Book* London: Walker Books, 1988.

Opie, Iona and Peter. "Books that Come to Life" *New York Times Literary Supplement* (September19, 1975), p. 1055.

Opie, Iona and Peter. *The Classic Fairy Tales* New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Opie, Iona and Peter. *The Lore and Language of School Children* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959.

Opie, Iona and Peter. "The Lore and Language of School Children: *Junior Libraries* in *Library Journal*, volume 85 (May 15, 1960) pp. 1981-1983.

Opie, Iona and Peter, editors. *The Oxford Book of Narrative Verse* New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.
Opie, Iona, Robert Opie and Brian Alderson. *The Treasures of Childhood: Books, Toys, and Games from the Opie Collection* New York: Arcade Publishing, 1989.
"Peter and Iona Opie: Patron Saints of children Literature" *Research Update* Spring/Summer 1990, pp. 1-8.
"Peter Opie: *Something About the Author* Detroit: Gale Research, volume 63, pp. 126-127.
"Playground Person" *New Yorker* (November 7, 1989), pp. 30-32.
Sullivan, C. W. "Gaming on the Lea" *Children's Literature* volume 15, 198, pp. 211-213.